

Myanmar: Genocide with Impunity

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No doubt, the currency of global trade will continue to dominate world finance and United States global influence. Indeed, the United States may also be seeking to counter-balance increasing Chinese clout by fostering trade and cooperation with Southeast Asian countries which benefit from cheap skilled labour. This was illustrated by the choice of countries President Obama first visited after his re-election in November 2012. They included Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia. With the West facing economic uncertainty and the potential of entering another recession together with the increasingly unstable situation in the Middle East and its possible impact on global oil prices in addition to the slowdown in the Chinese economy, sanctions on Russia and Brexit, trade will invariably always take precedence over human rights issues. We have seen this with the West in their dealings with Saudi Arabia, China and relatively recently with Myanmar.

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Since a state of emergency was declared on 10 June, 2012 Myanmar has witnessed serious sectarian violence in its northern Rakhine State between Buddhist Rakhinis and minority Muslim Rohingyas with UK-based NGOs reporting that both the Burmese army and police were targeting Muslim Rohingyas through mass arrests, violence, rape and systematic discrimination. Serious questions need to be answered by the then Myanmar Authorities as to whether the massacre of Muslim minorities was indeed state-sponsored. The loss of life, destruction of property, the displacement of families from their homestead and the inaction of the Government and the local administration in affected areas failing to make reparations and ensuring resettlement is nothing short of appalling. Anxious to flee the persecution many had taken to desperate measures. Consequently, this had resulted in the trafficking of Muslim Rohingyas by illegal gangs to countries like Indonesia and Malaysia often resulting in the tragic death of women and children at sea while making the perilous journey in unseaworthy vessels. For an impoverished country that is only recently beginning to assert itself on the global stage as an up-and-coming democracy after decades of military oppression it is unfortunate. It would appear that the state of Myanmar has abandoned the Rohingyas coercing them into being victims of political violence whose primary purpose is the systematic uprooting and destruction of an entire ethnic group. It was hoped that the landslide victory in November 2015 of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) in the country's first democratic elections since 1990 would give the new government the authority to address the plight of Muslim Rohingyas in Myanmar and revise the contentious Citizenship Law. (Unfortunately, Muslim Rohingyas were not allowed to vote in the 2015 elections.) Reports by different media streams, however, suggest that back in 2016 anti-Muslim sentiment had already been on the rise with Mosques and Muslim prayer halls being razed to the ground by armed mobs. Upon being elected, as ◆State Counselor◆; Aung San Suu Kyi surely had her task cut out in dealing with the Rohingya crises and the rise of Buddhist nationalism.

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Following coordinated attacks allegedly by a group of Muslim militants on 09 October, 2016 on three border posts between Myanmar and Bangladesh that left 9 border policeman dead a killing spree was reportedly unleashed by the Myanmar military as part of a

military counter-insurgency campaign which had witnessed allegations of rape and torture against innocent Rohingya civilians as well as, burning of their homesteads forcing thousands to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh. Surprisingly, reporting of these events at the time by mainstream western media outlets was remarkably low toned. These gruesome events bear testimony to the sad reality that the Nobel Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi grip on power is indeed still constrained by the military. [Bizarrely, under the constitution 25% of the seats in the legislature (Pyithu Hluttaw) are reserved for military representatives who also hold key ministries]. While western governments were competing with each other in making the most noise to celebrate the release of Aung San Suu Kyi it would appear that she has failed to stem the genocide of Muslim Rohingyas in the Rakhine state of Myanmar that began while Myanmar was being run by a military dictatorship. Instead the government sought to whitewash the allegations of genocide by appointing a Commission led by a former military general, named Myint Swe, who was also the former head of military intelligence and now Vice President. The Commission was widely criticized by human rights groups for lacking credibility because it was not independent and lacked outside experts. In fact, on 06 August, 2017 the National Investigation Commission on Rakhine State held a news conference on their findings into alleged abuses against ethnic Rohingyas after a 9 month domestic inquiry only to find that there was no evidence of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing contradicting claims made by the an earlier Report issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on 03 February, 2017 that concluded that the attacks against the Rohingya ♦very likely♦ amounted to crimes against humanity. Myint Swe further went on to deny charges that there had been gang rapes by the military as it swept through Rohingya villages in a security operation following the deadly attack against a border police post by insurgents in October 2016 in the Maungdaw area of Rakhine. Though the United Nations has mandated its own fact-finding mission to travel to the Maungdaw area to conduct its own inquiry, the Myanmar government had denied access to any such mission. Disturbingly, the United Nations has gone on record to say the Rohingya are ♦the most persecuted minority in the world♦.

>While during the Syrian Refugee Crisis the washed up body of Aylan Kurdi shocked the global conscience after pictures of Aylan's body was aired by all the major global news outlets a similar child's body was washed up on the bank of the river Naf on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border on 6 December, 2016. It was of a 16-month-old baby boy identified as Mohammed Shohayet lying dead in the mud. The image was first posted on a web portal run by Rohingya Vision later published by CNN and other leading media outlets. It then went viral on social media. Shohayet had drowned in the river Naf in Myanmar territory as the boat carrying his family sunk mid-river following their desperate attempt to flee Myanmar from persecution of government forces on the night of 04 December, 2016. Most of the passengers on the ill-fated boat reportedly were from the village, Ye Dwin Chaung in northern Maungdaw. With Western governments falling head over heels over Nobel Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, they had showed complete apathy to the genocide being perpetrated by Myanmar's security forces on Muslim Rohingyas. It is apparent therefore, that until recently the West had clearly lost its moral compass in failing to effectively address this tragedy.

>Following another deadly attack on 25 August, 2017 by insurgents on police posts armed with knives and homemade bombs killing 12 members of the security forces a large exodus of Muslim Rohingyas began fleeing the Rakhine State escaping a renewed military crackdown (reportedly more than 400,000 in the first four weeks since the crackdown). As the

western media began to take notice of the barbarity of these attacks reporting it on an almost daily basis towards the end of August 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi, on 06 September, 2017 denied outright that atrocities were being committed against the Rohingyas claiming that it was fake news based on misinformation aimed to promote the interests of terrorists. Shutting out foreign journalists from covering the troubled areas did not help much however, in ascertaining the truth. Furthermore, the multitude of harrowing reports of murder, plunder, arson and rape by those fleeing the conflict arriving in Bangladesh seeking refuge from the military onslaught cannot simply be dismissed as fake news. State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, sought to divert media attention by stressing the country's commitment in fighting terrorists. But then one must question whether the fight against so-called terrorists justifies ethnic cleansing and genocide? The reaction of the major powers in the region was particularly interesting to observe. Despite concerns raised by the Indian Prime Minister while making an official visit to Myanmar on 05 September, 2017; the Indian government itself had announced only days prior to the 25 August attack that it would be deporting its entire Rohingya population, thought to be around 40,000 that would also include some 16,000 refugees registered by the United Nations. In fact, after the 25 August attack, India's foreign ministry issued a strongly worded statement promising to stand firmly with Myanmar in its fight against terrorism. The intent behind India's position seems to represent India's desire to reach out and strike a chord with hard-lined Buddhist nationalist opinion. This is all part of India's strategy to counter Chinese influence among Southeast Asian countries.

It would appear that the strategy employed by the government of Myanmar particularly, following the attack by Rohingya insurgents on 25 August, 2017 is nothing short of a final solution, in this context of their willingness to weather the international criticism over its handling of the Rohingya issue as long as a sizeable number of the Rohingya population are forced to flee the Rakhine state by unleashing a brutal crackdown amid reports of murder, rape and arson being committed by the security forces and Buddhist nationalists. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein on 11 September, 2017 went on record to state that with human right investigators being denied access to fully assess the situation on the ground the crises would appear to be a textbook example of ethnic cleansing. The potential flip side of this genocide is also particularly worrying. On 05 September, 2017 the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres while condemning the attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army nevertheless, expressed concern about the security, humanitarian and human rights situation in Rakhine that could lead to increased radicalization. It is pertinent to point out that when desperation gives rise to radicalization it then becomes entrenched. Then on 29 September, 2017 at a meeting of the United Nations Security Council the UN Secretary General urged Myanmar to end with immediate effect military operations that have caused more than half a million Rohingya Muslims to flee to Bangladesh, terming the crisis, the world's fastest developing refugee emergency and a humanitarian and human rights nightmare. He went on to warn that the humanitarian crises was acting as a breeding ground for radicalization, criminals and traffickers. Mr. Guterres further stated that the broader crisis was generating multiple implications for neighbouring states and the larger region, including the risk of inter-communal strife and demanded that Myanmar Authorities provide unfettered access for humanitarian aid to get in as well as, ensuring the safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return of all those who have sought refuge across the border in neighbouring Bangladesh. At the same meeting the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, derided the Myanmar

government for the bloodshed calling the actions of the Myanmar Authorities as being a brutal, sustained campaign to cleanse the country of an ethnic minority.

Headed by its National Security Advisor, U Thaung Tun, the Myanmar delegation to the UN Security Council at the same meeting denied the accusation of genocide or ethnic cleansing claiming that the Myanmar government would do everything to prevent it rather than to adopt a policy to espouse it. Reiterating the point made by Aung San Suu Kyi in her televised speech on 19 September, 2017; he too insisted that the Myanmar government needed to understand the real reasons behind the exodus. Such a blatant rebuff of the United Nations by Myanmar is only possible because it has the backing of China and Russia (both Permanent Members of the UN Security Council). This brings into sharp focus the increasing inept of the United Nations and the necessity for much needed reform to respond to the challenges of the future. The post-World War II political consensus is fast changing and the United Nations must adapt otherwise risk jeopardizing its legitimacy and sustainability. The Myanmar situation should be taken as a wake-up call. It is difficult to rationalize that despite the horrors of the holocaust, the United Nations is unable to stop genocide, even in 2017 when the country allegedly commissioning ethnic cleansing can continue to do so as long as it has the backing of a Permanent Member of the Security Council. In this context, the United Nations Security Council in its current format is unfit for purpose.